

IRANIAN CULTURAL IMPACT
The Persepolitan Legacy in India

By: Mary Stewart

The story of the American archaeologist David Brainerd Spooner and his excavation of the Mauryan pillared hall at Kumrahar, Pataliputra (Patna) the capital of Indian state Bihar, is marked by a series of ironies. In 1913 he directed the excavations of what were supposed to be the palaces of India's first imperial rulers, Chandragupta and Asoka Maurya. While ancient literary sources indicated that the Mauryans had imitated the imperial Persians in palace building, Spooner's archaeological explorations provided only the faintest, isolated hint of this possibility. Bad weather hindered his explorations but gave him the time to think about his discovery and its implications. Inspired by the idea that he might have found the Persian Persepolis recreated on Indian soil, and by the power of the written word, Spooner searched every available avenue of scholarship to substantiate the point. His efforts led him to attempt to demonstrate that not only were Persian craftsmen responsible for Mauryan edifices but that the Mauryans themselves were Persian. Finally, he was forced to abandon his Kumrahar explorations, as part of the site encroached on a Muslim cemetery.

Spooner's annual reports to the Archaeological Survey of India and his article "The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History" attest to the depth and breadth of his enquiries and erudition. And yet, while Western archaeologists and art historians persist in the notion that a Mauryan palace was discovered at Kumrahar, they do so without ever mentioning Spooner.

Spooner was the only American archaeologist to have worked for the British Archaeological Survey of India. Given his thorough and persistent disposition, the story would have been vastly different had Spooner survived beyond his forty-sixth year. At the time of his death in 1925 he was still developing and refining his Persian theories. He began his career as Superintendent, Frontier Circle, in 1906, excavating Buddhist sites at Sahri-Bahlol and in 1907 at the nearby Takht-i-Bahi. At Shah-j-i-ki-Dheri, he discovered the Kanishka reliquary. He became Superintendent, Eastern Circle, in 1910, exploring first at Basrah (Vaisali), and then at Patna and Nalanda.^[1] In addition to his field and circle supervisory work he often assumed administrative and editorial duties for the ASI Director General, John Marshall. In 1919 he was appointed Deputy Director General. His colleagues may not always have agreed with his theories, but they respected his enterprise. For his services he was awarded an O.B.E.

When in 1912 the Indian industrialist Mr. Ratan Tata proposed to give the ASI a gift of Rs. 20,000 a year toward excavations of the would be palace of the Mauryan rulers, Spooner was selected to take charge of the exploration. In his initial report, Spooner noted that in 1892 at the



In his initial report, Spooner noted that in 1902, at the Pataliputra site known as Bulandi Bagh, Col. L. A. Waddell had unearthed a sandstone column capital he thought was Persian.^[2] But Spooner chose to begin his explorations at Kumrahar, to the south of Bulandi Bagh (fig. 1). On 7 February 1913, he uncovered most of a square substructure, laid out in ten rows of eight columns, a Mauryan pillared hall. On the southern end, he found a series of parallel wooden platforms (figs. 2-6). He wrote at the time: "The resulting plan thus exhibits a pronounced similarity in essential features with the famous hall of a hundred columns at Persepolis, and this together with certain other established points of similarity would seem at present to indicate a probable connection between the two."^[3]

For all Spooner's caution, the discovery must have been an exhilarating experience. As his earlier ASI reports and his *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum* indicate, he had often remarked on evidence of Persian influences and workmanship throughout Gandhara. However, the Kumrahar explorations revealed only one probable piece of evidence, a large column, 14'3" high (fig. 7). It was the only full column he found at the site. On its bottom were a series of mason's marks. As to these, he found a similarity with Persian marks described in Dieulafoy's *L'art antique de la Perse*, which he extended to Kumrahar (fig. 8).^[4] The other columns, he speculated, had sunk into the soft clay below (fig. 9).

Unfortunately, in the season of 1913-1914, Spooner's field efforts to advance his Kumrahar-Persepolis connection were completely frustrated. Heavy monsoon floods, swamping "twenty or thirty thousand square feet" to a depth of between fourteen and twenty-two feet, rendered the site unworkable.^[5] Marshall commented: "Indeed, Dr. Spooner himself goes so far as to express a regret that a report on [the excavations] should be necessary at all at the present juncture, seeing that the problems that present themselves are so numerous and perplexing, and that the digging has not advanced far enough to enable him to approach them with any degree of confidence. Nevertheless, his conjectures, although admittedly tentative, are so interesting and suggestive in themselves that I feel reluctant to pass them by in silence."^[6]

Indeed, the evidence was slim. Spooner's supports for his argument for the Persian presence at Kumrahar were: 1) the columns; 2) their spacing (the Persian and Indian systems of distance measurement are similar); 3) the discovery of a head of a statue he thought might have "stood in the hall"; 4) the discovery of a seal depicting a three-storeyed hall, which he relates to the Persian *tālār*, such as is found in the pillared hall at Persepolis and on the facade of Darius the Great's tomb.^[7]



Fig. 1. The original trench looking east. ASIEC 1912-1913, vol. 1, pl. 1029. (Click to enlarge)



Fig. 2. Plan of the Gupta Level (Click to enlarge)

THE FACADE OF Darius the Great Tomb.[\[14\]](#)

Marshall remained skeptical. "Brilliant and attractive as these theories are," he wrote, "it must be borne in mind that the evidence on which they are based is at present very slender and that the explorer himself does not put them forward as anything more than reasonable conjectures."[\[8\]](#)

Unable to continue his exploration at Kumrahar, Spooner turned his attention to other considerations, starting with "stratigraphical evidences" in the soil and debris, and in the process developing his pillar sinkage theory.[\[9\]](#) His second line of enquiry involved extrapolating a Mauryan palace, of which the pillared hall was but one part, from Lord Curzon's plan of Persepolis. All about him at Kumrahar were mounds that appeared to conform to the plan. The exploratory trenches he dug revealed a brick wall and some artefacts, but no further evidence of a Mauryan palace.[\[10\]](#)

The site was still waterlogged in the 1914-1915 season. Spooner had used his leave time for preparing his article on the Persepolitan connection for publication in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. In the field, he shifted his focus to Waddell's sites, especially Bulandi Bagh, where, he now stated, Waddell had unearthed a "Persian" capital in 1903.[\[11\]](#) Here Spooner found a wooden palisade, reputedly the wall surrounding the ancient city of Pataliputra as mentioned by Megasthenes.[\[12\]](#) Back at Kumrahar, exploring the mounds contingent to the pillared hall, he found a "boundary wall" at the southwest corner of the terrace. Again he tried to equate his discovery of the wall with the "Achemaeidian platform" upon which the Persepolitan palace buildings stood.[\[13\]](#) In attempting to trace the wall around the site, he encountered a Muslim cemetery. At this point all work at Kumrahar ceased.

Spooner's final discovery at Kumrahar, at a site southwest of the terrace known as Mauri Pokhar, was a potsherd bearing "a very unmistakable emblem of the Zoroastrian fire altar (fig. 10). The figure is remarkably similar to that form of fire altar which is shown on the facade of Artaxerxes' tomb at Persepolis. The same device has been found at Vaisali and at Bhita on sealings, and we have even seen it among the seals recovered this year at this very site."[\[14\]](#) The site name, Spooner said, means Magian's Pool. Thus, he felt that the Persian/Mauryan connection was complete.[\[15\]](#)

In this same report Spooner mentioned the publication of his article, "The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History." If the pillared hall at Kumrahar had been located from literary sources, surely a literary argument could be made

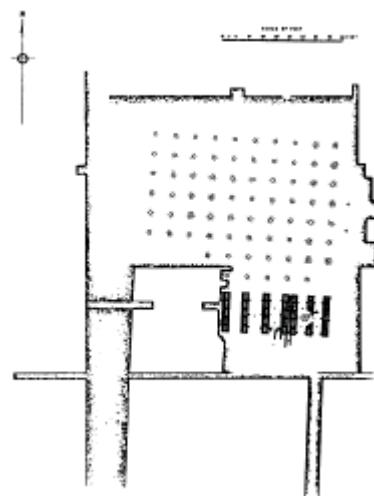


Fig. 3. Plan of the Mauryan Level. (Click to enlarge)

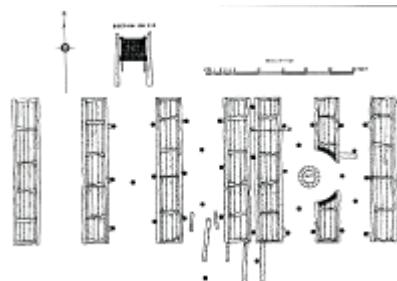


Fig. 4. Plan of the seven wooden platforms. (Click to enlarge)



Fig. 5. Pair of platforms looking southwest. (Click to enlarge)

for its significance in Indian history. For this he had called on his academic training as a classicist.

He had attended Stanford University ("the one college in America where a mere undergraduate could take up the study of Sanskrit"), and Harvard University, where he completed a Ph.D. with Lanman. He had studied and taught in Tokyo (his "guru" was Takakusu), Benares and Berlin. It was his wife, also a student of Lanman's, who had initially called his attention to the possible connection between Kumrahar and Persepolis.[\[16\]](#)

Spooner also read Chinese, Japanese, French and Spanish. His sources range from the classical through the European translations of the Chinese pilgrims' accounts (he even questioned some English renderings of the Chinese), to his European and Indian contemporaries in the fields of Indian and Persian archaeology, history of art and architecture, paleography, history, etymology, geography, numismatics and religious studies. In all, he cited some sixty-one sources.

Briefly, Spooner argued for many and various parallels between Persian (Zoroastrian) and Indian customs and traditions, similarities in words and their meanings, sculptural conventions, all pointing to Persian origin of not only the Mauryan dynasty but the Sakyen dynasty (the family of the Buddha) and a decidedly Zoroastrian element, if not origination, of Buddhism.[\[17\]](#) As E. A. Horne observed: "Such a revolutionary body of doctrine was unlikely to win ready acceptance."[\[18\]](#) He noted that Spooner was in the process of completing a book "embodying his maturer views," which he had just about finished when he died. Lamenting his demise on the brink of a significant historic contribution, Horne said: "Already it seems certain that it will be necessary to re-examine Dr. Spooner's discoveries at Pataliputra, and the daring speculations which they suggested to him, from an entirely new angle."[\[19\]](#)

However, this never happened. A. Berriedale Keith and F. W. Thomas offered criticism of some of his etymological points. Overall, Berriedale Keith was caustic, dismissive:

The only conclusion to be drawn from the evidence is clear. Iran [sic] may and no doubt did lend India ideas of various kinds; in each case these must be carefully looked for and examined, and ascribed to Iran only if another and Indian origin is not possible and natural. A Zoroastrian period of Indian history never existed, nor indeed was any such existence to be expected.[\[20\]](#)

In a note to his criticism, he added:



Fig. 6. The platforms looking north. (Click to enlarge)



Fig. 7. The existing column no. 3 in the sixth row from the north. (Click to enlarge)

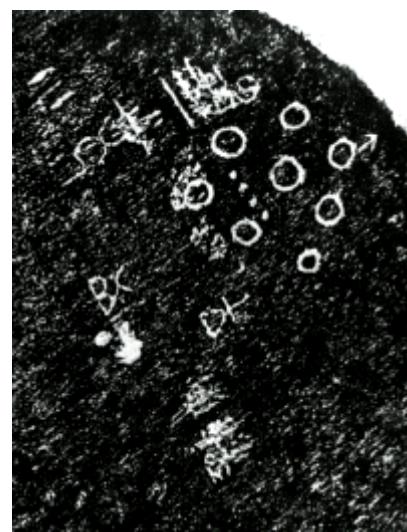


Fig. 8. Ink impression of the base of the existing column. (Click to enlarge)

IN A NOTE TO HIS CRITICISM HE ADDED.

It is clear that the equation of the Mauryan palace and the palace of Darius rests on wholly insufficient evidence on the archaeological side. There is not a priori reason to deny its possibility, but it must be established by archaeology, not by such evidence as adduced by Dr. Spooner.[\[21\]](#)

Thomas, while agreeing with Berriedale Keith on the last point, was more conciliatory. He wrote: "Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Dr. Spooner has made a gallant attempt to deal with a real problem, namely the extent of that Persian (or, at least, western) influence which is visible in the early architecture."[\[22\]](#)

These learned men were not alone in commenting on Spooner's article. As to the cumulative critical effect, the remarks of his obituarists are instructive. C. E. A. W. Oldham wrote:

Spooner anticipated that [his conclusions] would meet the usual fate of such novel and boldly stated speculations. Though sensitive, as most modest men are, he did not worry over criticism on minor issues, feeling that it did not affect the really essential questions involved. He was much cheered, on the other hand, by the very sympathetic treatment and even encouragement his arguments received at the hands of certain learned European and Indian scholars, whose opinion he justly valued.[\[23\]](#)

However, Horne presents a picture:

Right or wrong, however, the path of the pioneer in new and strange doctrines is a hard one; and what Dr. Spooner suffered was magnified a hundred times by his shy but proud and abnormally sensitive nature. It was not the honest skepticism of scholars which wounded him, much as it may have disappointed him. Nor was it the vulgar legend that since [the Parsi] Sir Ratan Tata had found the money for the Pataliputra excavations, it was merely a commercial quid pro quo to ascribe the glories of Chandragupta and his capital to the Parsis [sic] of old. This would have been cruel, if it had not been ridiculous. But it was the insinuation, the suggestion falsi that the scholar who put forward such a theory was prompted by a foreigner's unconscious desire to belittle the character of India's indigenous culture-it was this that hurt beyond bearing. Indeed, it is the sad truth, we fear, that the pain of it embittered his last years and clouded the joy in his work which was so characteristic of him. For here was a man who . . . devoted his life, from his very boyhood, to India's classical culture.[\[24\]](#)

These remarks suggest that a curtain was deliberately drawn over Spooner's Zoroastrian contribution to Indian scholarship. In 1915, Patna was a hotbed of Indian nationalism. Horne, who was secretary to the Bihar and Orissa Research Society, based at Patna, would have been particularly aware of any offence given to native sensibilities. Nevertheless, Spooner stayed on at Patna as the Eastern Circle Superintendent. In 1916 he began, with the assistance of funds donated by the Royal Asiatic Society, London, the exploration of the nearby monastic site of Nalanda. And, gradually, he assumed more administrative duties within the Survey.

Despite his death in 1925, the irony continues. While for all intents and purposes, Spooner vanishes from the western archaeological and art historical record, the next generation of scholars in these fields seem to have accepted without question the notion of a Persepolitan legacy.

Although he never mentions him, Percy Brown, writing in the 1940s, had definitely read Spooner's accounts. However, Brown insisted that the finds included "the pillars of an immense hypostyle hall



Fig. 9 The first subsidiary circles at teh depth of 18 feet. (Click to enlarge)



Fig. 10. Potsherd showing Zoroastrian fire alter emblem. (Click to enlarge)

in the royal palace."[\[25\]](#) He went on to say that Persian "craftsmen were also employed in the preparation of some of the most important parts of the Mauryan emperor's [Asoka's] palace."[\[26\]](#) He then proceeded to paraphrase Spooner with regard to the three-storeyed height of the pillared hall, the mason's marks and the bas-reliefs on Darius the Great' tomb.[\[27\]](#) And, as if for good measure, he suggested that fragments of "atlantean" figures and colossal sculptures found near Patna were "yakshas" supporting the roof of the pillared hall.[\[28\]](#)

In the next decade Benjamin Rowland described the Kumrahar excavation as the great audience hall of the Mauryan palace and even repeated Spooner's theory that the columns had sunk into the soil. He concluded that the Mauryan period of Indian history was a natural extension of the Achaemenian civilisation, and went so far as to say: "The conscious adoption of the Iranian palace plan by the Mauryas was only part of the paraphernalia of imperialism imported from the West."[\[29\]](#)

Mortimer Wheeler, in the 1960s, stated with characteristic drama: "Achaemenian Persepolis was a blackened ruin, but Mauryan Pataliputra rose in its stead."[\[30\]](#) However, Wheeler and Rowland quote Megasthenes, the envoy of Seleucus to Chandragupta, ca. 300 BCE, regarding Chandragupta's palace: "[It] was calculated to excite admiration, and with which neither Susa, with all its costly splendour, nor Ecbatana, with all its magnificence, can vie."[\[31\]](#) This was, according to Wheeler: "A Persian paradise. The craftsmen of the old and now defunct Persian empire had found a new and congenial home in the uprising empire and northern India."[\[32\]](#)

None of these writers appear to have read Spooner's Zoroastrian article, nor Berriedale Keith's and Thomas' suggestions that more archaeological work needed to be done at Kumrahar if his claims were to be considered valid. Though this other dimension of Spooner's work does not appear to have been known in western quarters, it was not forgotten in India. An exploration conducted by A. S. Altekar and V. Mishra, under the auspices of the K. P. Jayaswal Research institute, did take place at Kumrahar between 1951-1956. And it was based on Spooner's findings.

Two ironies occur at this point. The first concerns the relationship between Spooner and Jayaswal. In his Zoroastrian article Spooner refers to "my friend K. P. Jayaswal, who calls attention to the Avestan name Mourva, the Margu of the Achaemenian inscriptions, and proposes, in the light of all the evidences now adduced, to derive Maurya from this source."[\[33\]](#)

Secondly, there was Jayaswal's response. In 1916, Jayaswal, lecturer in Ancient Indian History, University of Calcutta, at Spooner's request wrote an article giving his "conclusion to [Spooner's] theory."[\[34\]](#) He wrote: "Being on the spot I have had the opportunity to follow the progress of the Kumrahar excavations. I do not think that the learned archaeologist has succeeded in proving that the site excavated represents Chandragupta's palace. On a closer search the Persepolitan picture disappears from Kumrahar." He proposed to give his reasons for not being at all satisfied with the "architectural evidence" in another article.[\[35\]](#) However, there is no indication that he ever wrote anything more about Spooner.

Altekar examined the site using Spooner's conclusions. He stated that the hall had burned in the Sunga period.[\[36\]](#) Whatever later travellers, such as the Chinese pilgrims, reported seeing, it was not a Mauryan building. Secondly, he discovered the missing pillars, thereby discrediting Spooner's sinkage theory. The pillars had been removed by later builders who then filled up the holes with debris.[\[37\]](#) Thirdly, finding no other evidence of Mauryan building at the site, he determined that the pillared hall was an isolated structure.[\[38\]](#) Lastly, he described the pillared hall as "probably the earliest huge stone-pillared structure to be built by Indian architects."[\[39\]](#)

While Altekar may have satisfied the requirements put forth by Jayaswal, Berriedale Keith and Thomas regarding Kumrahar and its Persepolitan legacy, there is no way of knowing whether Rowland and Wheeler knew of his work or chose to ignore it. It is a final irony that the notion of a Persian and Persepolitan architectural legacy was as strong for them as it had been for Spooner.

Acknowledgement:

I am indebted to the British Library Oriental and India Office Collections, London, and to the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, for permission to reproduce the illustrations shown in this article.

Notes:

A SIAR	Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report
ASIECAR	Archaeological Survey of India Eastern Circle Annual Report
ASIEC	Archaeological Survey of India Eastern Circle photograph album
BL/OIOC	British Library/Oriental and India Office Collections

- [1] C. E. A. W. Oldham, "David Brainerd Spooner," JRAS (1925 /, pp. 375-76.
- [2] L. A. Waddell, Discovery of the Exact Site of Asoka's Classic Capital of Pataliputra (Calcutta, 1892/. The capital Waddell found is illustrated in M. Wheeler, *Flames over Persepolis* (London, 1968/, p. 130. Waddell had been searching specifically for an Asokan pillar. Other capitals, on exhibition at the Patna museum, do not seem to have come from Kumrahar but rather from other Patna sites, or from repairs to the infrastructure in the area over the years.
- [3] Spooner, "Pataliputra," ASIECAR 1912-13, p. 55. Also quoted by J. Marshall in ASIAR 1912-13, pt. 1, p. 24; Spooner, "Pataliputra," ASIAR 1912-13, p. 70, and in Spooner, "The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History," JRAS (1915) , p. 64.
- [4] Spooner, ASIECAR 1912-13, p. 59. He refers to Dieulafoy's *L'art antique de la Perse* (Paris, 18841889/, pt. 1, figs. 12 and 13. In this regard, David Stronach found eleven mason's marks in Persepolis, also at Pasargadae. The full chart is reproduced in Stronach, *Pasargadae* (Oxford, 1978), opposite p. 22. Marks 1, 3B and 10 are possibly similar. The marks shown do not include a circle with an arrow, flattened on the base, (see fig. 10) that Spooner regarded as significant, yet stretching the point: "The form was not identical, perhaps, but the resemblance was nevertheless striking." ("The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History," p. 67.)
- [5] Spooner, ASIAR 1912-13, p. 70.
- [6] Marshall, ASIAR 1913-14, pt. 1, p. 23.
- [7] Ibid., p. 24.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Spooner, ASIECAR 1913-14, pp. 45-58.
- [10] Ibid., pp. 58-74. The plan is found in N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persians* (London, 1892).
- [11] Spooner, ASIECAR 1914-15, p. 48. D. R. Patil comments on Spooner's failure to take into account work done after Waddell's first explorations by P. C. Mukerji, published in 1896-1897, but not listed in the British Library catalogue (*The Antiquarian Remains in Bihar* [Patna, 1963], p. 380). And although Patil says that Spooner also fails to mention Waddell's 1903 account, Spooner was familiar with his second report.
- [12] Ibid., p. 49.
- [13] Ibid., p. 54.
- [14] Ibid., p. 60.
- [15] No more work was done at Pataliputra until the seasons of 1922-1923 and 1926-1927. Manoranjan Ghosh, Curator of the Patna Museum, devoted his time to continuing Spooner's work at Bulandi Bagh unearthing the wooden palisade. (See J. A. Page, "Bulandi Bagh, Near Patna," ASIAR 1926-27, pp. 13540.) According to Patil (*Antiquarian Remains*, p. 394), Ghosh published a monograph (*The Pataliputra* [Patna, 1919]).
- [16] E. A. Horne, "D. B. Spooner (1879-1925)," Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1926), p. clxiii.
- [17] Spooner, "The Zoroastrian Period," pp. 35-89; 405-55.
- [18] Horne suggests that the article appeared "somewhat prematurely," that the title Spooner later wanted was "The Magian Period," "D. B. Spooner," p. cxii.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] A. B. Keith, "The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History," [RAS (1916), pp. 142-43.
- [21] Ibid., p. 143.
- [22] F. W. Thomas, "Dr. Spooner, Asura Maya, Mount Meru, and Karsa," [RAS (1916), p. 362.
- [23] Oldham, "David Brainerd Spooner," p. 376.
- [24] Horne, "D. B. Spooner," pp. cxii-iii.
- [25] P. Brown, *Indian Architecture* (Bombay, n.d.), p. 10.
- [26] Ibid., p. 12.
- [27] Ibid., p. 13.
- [28] Ibid. No doubt the colossal figure Brown refers to is that of a female holding a fly-whisk, found in 1917 on the banks of the Ganges at Didarganj and dated to the third century BCE It was described by Spooner in "Didarganj Image now in the Patna Museum," *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society* 5 (1919), pp. 107-13.
- [29] B. Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 63-64.
- [30] Wheeler, *Flames over Persepolis*, p. 13.
- [31] Ibid., p. 131; Rowland, *Art and Architecture of India*, p. 60. They do not seem to notice that quoting Megasthenes in this instance does not actually make the Persepolitan connection.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Spooner, "The Zoroastrian Period," p. 407.

- [34] K. P. Jayaswal, "The Zoroastrian Period of Indian History," fournal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society 2 (1916), p. 98.
- [35] Ibid., p. 104.
- [36] A. S. Altekar and V. Mishra, Report on Kumrahar Excavations 1951-1955 (Patna, 1963), pp. 14-15.
- [37] Ibid., p. 16.
- [38] Ibid., p. 14.
- [39] Ibid., p. 25.

source:

http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Architecture/persepolitan_legacy_patna_india.htm